

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE **14**

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**OPINION**

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# Religious rights

**A**t the funeral of former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William J. Casey, a Roman Catholic bishop saw fit to denounce Mr. Casey's support for the Nicaraguan contras.

Delivering a eulogy, Bishop John McGann paid tribute to Casey's patriotism and conviction, but said he could not disguise his fundamental disagreement with Casey on the contra issue.

Whether that was the appropriate occasion for the bishop to make that point is a matter of debate. But he is certainly entitled to his view, and it is the strength of our democratic system that a diversity of viewpoints should be allowed to swirl in public.

Clearly it does, when demonstrators outside the gates of the CIA in Langley, Va., can shout in favor of a victory by the Marxist Sandinistas over the contras. Other pro-Sandinista Americans head for Managua to work for the Sandinistas, even as they protest United States involvement with the contras.

Bishop McGann conceded at the funeral that Casey "must have thought us bishops blind to the potential for a Communist threat in this hemisphere." That is probably true.

But not all Catholics share the bishop's view. The Sandinista regime is, after all, the one that insulted and embarrassed their Pope on his visit to Nicaragua. And other Catholics have a harsher view of what the Sandinistas are doing to their religion, and the religious and human rights of others.

For example, a lay Catholic human rights group called the Puebla Institute has just published a report on human rights abuses by the Sandinistas. It is intriguing reading.

After talking to Catholic priests and lay readers in the Nicaraguan countryside, institute personnel detected a pattern of harassment and persecution. According to their findings more than 300,000 Nicaraguans - some 10 percent of the population - had fled the country by early this year. The institute decided to interview some of these people in United Nations refugee camps in Costa Rica and Honduras.

A number of Protestant evangelicals complained of religious discrimination by government officials and Sandinista defense committees. Some refugees said they were pressured by state security officials to end their membership in a particular church, to stop preaching, or to spy on the congregation and report back to state security. Others were told they could continue their prayer meetings but were ordered to stop proselytizing. They were threatened with imprisonment if they disobeyed.

Ramiro Vallejos, an evangelical pastor from Jalapa, said he was held for 25 days without being charged. He said his interrogators taunted him about his faith, saying such things as: "If you believe in God, why isn't your God helping you get out of jail?"

José Luis Lacaya García, a member of the evangelical Free Apostolic Church of Managua, was detained and pressured to stop going to prayer meetings. He was told to stop attending church and instead to attend Sandinista defense committee meetings. His interrogators ridiculed the Bible in front of him.

Andrés Seledrón, a deeply committed evangelist, was detained for eight months because he refused to fight for the Sandinistas. His interrogators asked him: "Do you believe in God? Show us he is here!"

The Puebla Institute also looked at the overall question of human rights. While cautious about recounting refugee allegations of torture, the report cites 10 cases of special concern.

One man, serving a three-year sentence on counter-revolutionary charges, claimed he was hanged by his thumbs for two days, his toes just touching the ground. His guards beat him with brass knuckles. He says he was held in a completely dark cell for 28 days. In another cell, he was held for nine days in water and excrement up to his ankles and given only enough water to wet his lips every 24 hours.

It is stories such as these that we must also hear as we debate the role of the church and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.